

The Rt Hon. Pat McFadden MP,
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
Cabinet Office
70 Whitehall
London
SW1A 2AS

Our reference: ICO/O/JE/L/ERL/0809
By email to:

25 July 2025

Dear Rt Hon. Pat McFadden MP,

Subject: Stopping Data Breaches in Government

I am writing to seek the commitment of government to do more to prevent data breaches in the public sector.

This letter comes in the wake of recent high-profile data breaches in government and the wider public sector, including:

- last week's Ministry of Defence (MoD) disclosure of the Afghan staff data breach;
- a similar breach by the MoD in 2021;
- the PSNI breach which put at risk the lives of serving police officers.

These breaches have real world consequences including putting lives at risk and undermining public trust in government.

My office has made a commitment to try a different approach to regulating the public sector. This approach recognises that monetary penalties often take resource away from vital front-line services and risk re-victimising people relying on those services who have been impacted by a breach.

As part of our public sector approach, both the ICO and government, through the Permanent Secretaries in DSIT and the Cabinet Office, committed to working together to raise standards and ensure we use incidents to learn lessons and prevent future harm.

Some progress has been made, but the government needs to go further and faster to ensure Whitehall, and the wider public sector put their practices in order. As a matter of urgency, the government should fully implement the recommendations of the Information Security Review which the Cabinet Office undertook following the PSNI breach.

A key recommendation of the Review was for the Civil Service Operations Board (or an alternative cross government board) to assume responsibility for establishing a strong senior leadership voice for consistent data protection practice across government, including lessons learned from significant breaches.

Central coordination across government is essential for avoiding further incidents of this seriousness. I would therefore be grateful if you could provide me with an update on whether this and the other recommendations have been implemented.

As you know, I am fully committed to supporting the government in its ambitions to transform the public sector and unleash the power of technological innovation in the economy. This can only be achieved if there is public trust in the ability of government to handle personal information securely; that trust is undermined by breaches of this nature.

I would like to meet with you and your ministerial colleagues as soon as possible to discuss these issues and agree a set of practical actions you will take for improving systems and practices. I will ask my office to liaise yours on a mutually convenient date.

Finally, the Chair of the Science, Innovation, and Technology Committee has provided me with a copy of her letter (dated 24 July) to you about this case. In the interests of transparency and completeness I will also provide her with a copy of this letter.

I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

John Edwards
UK Information Commissioner

Copied to:

The Rt Hon. Peter Kyle MP, Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology

Sir Chris Wormald KCB, Cabinet Secretary